UT Austin's curriculum changes leave students and faculty questioning the future of social and cultural studies

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed by the professors and students interviewed are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views or position of the University of Texas at Austin.

The lights shine with a gray, cold hue in the Gordon White Building. Corkboards line the walls, covered in posters bringing bold reds, greens and blues to the space. "Consolidation is an attack on staff," a bright blue poster seems to scream.

Since February 2026, the building has housed UT Austin's social and cultural analysis department, formed through the consolidation of African and African diaspora studies, American studies, Mexican American and Latina/Latino studies, and Women's, Gender and Sexuality studies. The change was originally scheduled for Fall 2027.

Then in August 2026, UT Austin president Jim Davis announced plans to rework the core curriculum, saying the changes would provide "a broad and thorough general education." Of 49 courses the department submitted, the provost's office only approved 16 for spring 2027. None of the submitted Women's and Gender studies courses were approved.

"There's nothing in the new core that says that courses that involve questions of women or race can't be part of the new core," said Devin Stauffer, chair of the Core Curriculum Task Force. The 22-member task force established three pillars: Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences and STEM.

"Our task force was not trying to keep certain things out for political reasons. We just thought that there was too much niche, narrow courses," Stauffer said.

In September, officials also eliminated all majors within the department except American Studies. Gorgeous Monroe, UT Austin's 2026 homecoming queen, added African and African Diaspora Studies to her two other majors in an attempt to save the program. She, like many other minority students, feels pushed aside.

"None of those pillars would be anything without the diversity that came within those fields," Monroe said.

Staff had only two weeks to submit courses to the provost's office. Former American Studies chair Lauren Gutterman said there was "no substantive or meaningful faculty involvement" in the decisions, and students in the affected majors were not consulted.

Courses that no longer count toward the core can still be taken as electives, but faculty members say most will likely be canceled. Gutterman urged students to take department courses while they still can.

“It just makes me really sad that these areas of study that communities have fought for over the decades… (are) undermined and taken apart this way. It’s really incredibly painful,” Gutterman said.

Faculty and students want transparency, more time to submit courses and a rubric explaining core-credit requirements. Gutterman said the changes give the provost’s office “a kind of new, unprecedented… opportunity to control what we can teach.”

Neither Davis nor the provost’s office replied to requests for comment.

The policies behind the changes

Senate Bill 17 prohibited specified diversity, equity and inclusion activities at public higher education institutions. Following the bill’s implementation in January 2024, the Multicultural Center, Gender and Sexuality Center, Monarch Program and other offices closed.

“Nearly 65 staff members were let go,” said Linamaria Murillo, an associate professor of women and gender studies. “One political party right now in the state of Texas is in charge, and they are using their full power that they wield legislatively to make these very dramatic and likely generational changes… to the detriment of the students.”

In April 2025, UT Austin stopped requiring its Skills and Experience Flag system. The next month, Senate Bill 37 expanded governing boards’ authority over curricula, degree programs and administrative hiring and restricted faculty senates to an advisory role.

Stauffer said the university chose to completely rework the core curriculum at its own discretion, going beyond required state compliance.

Students lose more than course options

The new core ends the First-Year Signature Course program, which required every student to take one of more than 220 courses unrestricted by major or college.

Theater Education freshman Anna Nelson took “Disability in the Media,” inspired by her brother who has a learning disability. She hopes to provide “a safe haven” for future students, but her professor says the course may no longer be offered.

“What starts here changes the world? You’re not letting anything start here. You’re letting the world change us,” Nelson said.

Isabela Salazar, a third-year student minoring in women and gender studies, said UT’s reputation for equal opportunity has changed.

“You’re telling students, it’s no longer required… aka, no longer worth the effort,” Salazar said.

Salazar said professor Maria Cotera had to essentially censor her “Chicana Feminisms” syllabus in hopes the course could continue. As a first-generation Mexican American student, she considers these classes as important as her major psychology courses.

“Being in a class that’s actually thought-provoking and opinionated with something different is why I value them,” she said.

Monroe said Black students no longer feel welcome on campus. “It does suck to have to… be an activist and a college student and working and trying to figure my life out… But somebody has to do it,” she said. “That’s what our precursors did.”

An uncertain future for the core

Departments are applying for core status through 12 prospectuses for the 2027-28 school year. The first deadline, for Great Questions of Human Life, is Oct. 19. Departments again have two weeks to submit proposals.

Murillo said her department faces “intense constraints” while figuring out its own infrastructure and navigating deadlines without clear approval criteria.

“It cloaks all of us in deep stress,” Murillo said.

Some faculty members have avoided submitting courses because of that uncertainty, said Stephannie Mulder, vice president of UT’s chapter of the American Association of University Professors.

“This process has been hurried, rushed, accelerated,” Mulder said. This hasn’t stopped her team from trying.

Murillo, also a graduate adviser, said students and recent alumni are “extremely frightened” by the “erosion on so many levels.” She expects enrollment to drop.

Murillo questioned why students would choose UT Austin if they felt their “education is being thwarted… being diluted,” asking, “Why would you (come here)? Why would anyone?”